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ON PAGE A2

THE WASHINGTON POST
7 April 1981

Scaled-Down National Se
Still a White House

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Although the Reagan administration has scaled down the public and private stature of the White House national security affairs adviser — as compared to the heyday of Henry A. Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski — it is now clear that even this new low-profile version remains close to the powerful center of government decision-making.

For example, when recommendations go to President Reagan from Cabinet officers on national security matters, they usually go in with a covering memo from Reagan's national security affairs adviser, Richard V. Allen, pulling the various elements together and explaining to the president, in brief, what he is about to look at.

Allen's job for the president, as he explained it during an interview in his office in the White House's West Wing, is to make sure that the Cabinet views show all the options available to the president and, later, to make sure the decision is implemented. "In the event an option is not fully explicated, or points are missing," Allen adds, "it is our job to fill them in."

News Analysis

In an administration designed around Cabinet government, that ability to fill in what may be missing from Cabinet recommendations is a key indicator that power still resides in the national security adviser's office.

To help Reagan further with the kinds of long-range studies that the rest of the government involved in daily operations seldom has time for, Allen has assembled a 64-member staff that is a mixture of like-minded conservative colleagues, academics, military officers, former CIA officials and foreign service officers.

Allen, a soft-spoken, gray-haired 45-year-old with hardline views about the Soviet Union and U.S. foreign and defense policy, meets with Reagan at least once a day and briefs him about national security matters. The staff that Allen presides over is that of the National Security Council (NSC), the nation's highest decision-making body and chaired by the president.

Last December, when then president-elect Reagan named Allen as his assistant on national security, Allen told reporters: "You are seeing a disappearing act right now."

Reagan's idea, which Allen shares, was to end the confusion in this government and others that sometimes occurred when Kissinger or Brzezinski, rather than the secretary of state, spoke out forcefully and publicly on controversial policy issues.

"The secretary of state will be the president's principal spokesman and adviser" on foreign policy matters, Reagan said. The national security affairs adviser, it was said, will revert to the more invisible, behind-the-scenes role of the Eisenhower years, limited mostly to coordinating the views of the bureaucracy.

"After nine or ten weeks," Allen says, "I think we are in pretty good shape. We are up and working and on the right track."

But despite his own and the White House's efforts, Allen and his staff have not quite disappeared. In fact, they have become increasingly visible lately. Furthermore, some critics are not sure the system is working well and so the role of the adviser and staff is once again becoming a subject of debate within government.

On March 21, Allen delivered his first public speech since taking office. It was a controversial one, pointing to concerns about pacifist sentiment in some quarters of Europe. Though visiting Europeans acknowledge this is so, the speech is known to have annoyed the State Department, which had not seen the text first, and some U.S. allies.

A few days earlier, Richard E. Pipes, a Soviet expert from Harvard University and a senior member of Allen's staff, also expressed some controversial views in an interview that he apparently thought was off-the-record.

Pipes reportedly suggested that detente was dead, that economic problems eventually would confront Moscow with a grim choice between reforming its system or going to war, and that the West German foreign minister might be susceptible to Soviet pressures. The State Department quickly moved to disavow Pipes' remarks.

It is something of an irony, therefore, that while the new administration has laid heavy emphasis on speaking with one voice and submerging the once powerful office of the national security adviser, the first few times public attention has been focused on that office it has been over controversy.

Allen's operation has also become more visible because the new administration includes a dominant personality, Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. Some of the squabbles for turf set off by Haig or those trying to contain him have caught the NSC in the middle and spilled into public view.

But a larger question now surfacing within the defense and foreign policy sector of the government is whether it is possible to go all the way back to the days of a down-rated White House national security adviser and staff.

Beyond that lies yet another question. If the security adviser should play a more forceful role, is Allen, who remains more of a mystery man to the bureaucracy than his more outspoken predecessors, able to play it?

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